

# PO‘OULI

(*Melamprosops phaeosoma*)

In 1973 students participating in the Hana Rainforest Project from the University of Hawai‘i discovered a grayish, cinnamon brown bird in the dense ‘ōhi‘a forests on the northeast slope of Haleakalā. This rare bird, now known as the Po‘ouli, had never been described before. The excitement following its discovery was coupled with the somber realization that so much remains to be learned about Hawaiian natural history.

**DISTRIBUTION:** The last three known Po‘ouli are found in three separate home ranges in Hanawi Natural Area Reserve on the northeast slopes of Haleakalā from 4,600 to 6,700 feet in elevation.

**DESCRIPTION:** The Po‘ouli is dark grayish brown above with cinnamon-brown on the neck and back; underparts are buff colored washed with brown. A white throat is contrasted by a black mask extending across the forehead, chin, and eyes. The bill is black; feet and legs are dark brown. Sexes are similar and 5.25 inches in length.

**VOICE:** Calls are similar to those of the Maui Parrotbill and Maui Creeper and described as a harsh repetitive “chick” and “wh-whit.”

**NESTING:** Currently one male and two female Po‘ouli are all that are known to remain. All three birds live in different parts of the forest and it is unlikely that they even know each other exist. Efforts are underway to create a breeding pair. Several options exist and this year (2002) the Maui Forest Bird Recovery Project attempted to translocate a female into the males’ home range. Sadly, this attempt did not result in a breeding pair it is unclear if the two birds ever met. Another possible option is capturing all three birds and bringing them into a captive facility.

**DIET:** Po‘ouli appear to feed primarily on small snails and beetles, but may also eat a variety of insects and larvae. They forage on branches or thin trunks in the understory of the ‘ōhia rainforest.

**CONSERVATION NOTE:** Subfossil records of bones found in a lava tube on the dry southwest slopes of Haleakalā indicate that these birds once occupied a much larger range. Disturbances to their former and present habitat are probably responsible for their decline. Most of the dry and mesic forests on Maui up to 5,000 feet elevation have been cleared for timber, cattle ranching, or agriculture. The present habitat of wet ‘ōhi‘a forest is threatened by damage from feral pigs and other ungulates. The rooting of pigs disturbs the understory of the forest, destroying microhabitats that are critical to the survival of the snails and insects that may make up the Po‘ouli’s diet. They also create breeding grounds for mosquitos. Avian diseases transmitted by mosquitoes also limit the range of Po‘ouli habitat, many forest birds can only survive at elevations free from mosquitos. If Po‘ouli are to be saved from extinction, their habitat must be managed to maintain or reestablish native vegetation, and further research must be conducted to better understand reasons for their decline.



One of the last three known Po‘ouli with identification bands

— Photo by MFBRP